

The Solitaire Players

[Prologue and Chapter One version 2.2 - 36 pages]

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This is the last pitch I made to my editors at Sac'to Weekly, before I "took the law into my own hands." I was sure we were never going to find any way to agree on anything subtle about what might be newsworthy.

-John Morganstern

"If we didn't want the world to be exactly the way it is, it wouldn't be."

Davie had suggested that the mall was about more than mall rats. One of his friends had balked at that with a smile, and walked away.

Nina put a hand on his arm and said, "We?"

Nobody mentioned that he wouldn't be finding any friends in there. His constant, disconnected cheerfulness spooked people.

Jack said, "Let's all not be mall rats," keeping things obscure and generic.

"I like being a mall rat," Bobby put in, "...by myself."

According to Nina, "That doesn't count."

"It counts," said Jack, "if the mall rats think so."

"If they notice." Nina didn't always want to be noticed.

"They notice." Jack was certain. "What else have they got?"

Nina said none of it meant anything to her.

Davie sat back awkwardly on the edge of a tree planter and folded his arms. "Yeah. Try to live in a world without malls."

A lot of the time, things like this went without comment. The consensus was that Davie was smart enough to eventually work them out, if he ever wanted to — if we ever allow evolution to get going again.

"Cake," said Jack. His usual final word on this kind of subject. As in, "Let them eat..." Davie would never get them to bicker.

It was a dry, hot day last June. Suburbia was trying to offer another empty one, so they were inventing something else. They were at the mall to see a carnival in the parking lot. They walked around drinking paper cups of coffee from a shop inside, randomly commenting on things. Michael wasn't there, but some of his aunt and uncle's old rides were. Nina was recording random sound for him to sample.

Davie had started to get in line at a ticket booth. He turned and saw the others looking at him, so he came back and they all walked on. There was a cheap, but large action-figure toy hanging by a string from a post. Nina reached up and turned it so that it faced Davie.

"Got this one?" she asked.

However disinterested, any one of them could tell that it was "incorrect." Davie dubbed it, "Indiana Skywalker." He only had a few of the merchandising figurines left, but he still had all of the movies. Jack's attention and comments wound up being about the girls around. Bobby snapped the lid off and on his coffee, saying "...movies, malls, parking lots, carnivals..." to nobody.

Mrs. Bert was there on a small, but unavoidable errand. She didn't get out much anymore — just on her street, with some neighbors; lawn furniture out front, on the corner. But there was also

the internet, and she was trying things. She had the tarps off of Mr. Bert's motorhome for the day and had had to park it way out. On her trip across the parking lot she stopped to watch two kids whirling around in a giant cup and saucer. Nearby, there were some retro arcade games happening at a whole new scale. '*I better be on the lookout for first-person shooters.*'

They had all heard about Proclamation 8 on the news. They knew that unemployment had become a problem again — the new kind of unemployment: people refusing to participate in the "income opportunity" system.

"Tupperware parties," according to Jack.

Bobby, Nina, Jack and their friends wouldn't be, "...spending any time in any of the lounges at any big-box store." Nor would they be, "...trying to get enough 'documented recognition' to earn comps," nor, "...trying to play the whole fashion-model role at a favorite boutique, to get free clothes."

They wouldn't be making themselves, "...the 'value-added' on merchandise, even if that might pay the rent." That is, they wouldn't be anything like the people who were, "...taking a percentage of what's on the price tag for a torque wrench as compensation for a few minutes of showing people how to really enjoy using one ...or how to enjoy something about me — if I'm doing the demo — that might be remotely related to hand tools ...or books ...or an amazing new moisturizer..." None of them would be campaigning to "...get elected Floor Leader."

"All publicity is good publicity," was Bobby's flat sarcasm on all that.

They wouldn't be "...taking a chit that's equal to a comp and trading that for a supply of pizzas." And they wouldn't be "...like the non-charisma people, trying to move up the ranks a little just by the grace of their 'shopper participation.'"

They could see that almost all of the newer kind of disaffected people were as disruptive as the chronic jobless had been a few years earlier. But unlike most of the disaffected, they never talked about being disillusioned with their own roles.

Before the "opportunities" started up, Nina called the general job-outlook, "Musical chairs." The way she saw it, there had been, "...five overqualified people for every position that opened..." while "...in every other way, the economy seemed to somehow be doing fine..."

They wouldn't be taking sides, as this new proclamation attempted to define who the disruptive people were, why those people were disruptive and what to do about it. They wouldn't be part of, "...the bickering that's in the background noise again." The small, but sharp, "...tang of uncertainty," all around wouldn't be their biggest problem. Everybody else could worry about, "...the stress that's meant to keep things taught enough to sing; that's snapping some strings instead," now that it was clear that a small percentage of the population wouldn't be going along with the "opportunities." They hadn't been "...keeping tabs on any 'socio-economic indicators' that might be wafting downward."

King George may not like the situation, "...but, so what?"

In the news about the proclamation, Mrs. Bert had heard a discussion of the origin of the term "window-shoppers" and how it had become a derogatory term for certain people, even when those people weren't in the vicinity of a shop window, even at home with their otherwise happy families. She had heard it said that some families were acutely sensitive to the disruption and that some of these homes were, "...popping with dispute again." It wouldn't be "...anything I would call the police about, but some of my neighbors might, if the recriminations got loud enough."

She had heard a couple of sound-bites.

From a suit: "We hadn't anticipated being null with some people."

From a teen: "They don't *do* anything. They don't *want* anything. Why can't they just go away?"

When Mrs. Bert got inside the mall, she tried to pick out the troublemakers, but couldn't. '*What am I? What should I not do?*'

She had heard that state officials had "no choice" but to start rounding up this new order of vagrants — using tax withholding records; segregating them by age, education, determination of consequential appeals. She had heard about the plans being made for turning surplus government

property into detention centers. Before much longer, they would be starting-up the first one, right there in the capital of The Golden State and filling it with “losers.”

* * *

When “the camp” first opened, decks of playing cards and a small TV, with basic cable were about all that was provided for the detainees to keep themselves busy during what was expected to be a short stay. Davie’s friends just played solitaire, but not him. He joined the poker game. Poker doesn’t work without substantial money involved, so coins represented a hundred times their face value and it was assumed that everyone would pay-up on the outside. Davie was into what he thought to be some serious debt to some of the others around the table. He would just be able to cover his losses at the nearest ATM and, “It hurt.”

The game’s promoter was a guy who had recently realized that poker was something he had overlooked — an ideal way to bluff on logic for the kind of payoff he always counted on. This guy carefully slid three tall stacks of coins over to Davie. In poker, loaning somebody a new stake is presumed to be welcome — part of the unspoken quality of the game. Nobody would want to have to ask.

Davie didn’t seem to see it that way. He scooped up the coins and dropped them in the guy’s lap.

Somebody said, “That’s it.”

Frank, an older guy, said, “Wait a minute...”

Davie had immediately gotten up and walked over to sit with his friends, followed by most of the other poker players, who left by a door just beyond. Last was Frank, who was also in the hole. His pleas to continue the game had been ignored as everyone walked away. Frank tried glaring at Davie and then locked eyes with Nina, smiling up at him.

The smile was always unconditional, but Frank just said, “People like you...”

Nina touched her heart with the fingertips of one hand, still smiling.

Frank went on: “This place is for you. All you.”

Mild taunts were exchanged with others in the group; Frank the only one not happy about it; Davie not knowing what side to take. They had been over all this several times in the past few weeks. “Get a job,” kinds of accusation and insults from a guy who — like everyone else there, of course — didn’t have one ...in a world that wasn’t always about jobs anymore.

“...like the world owes you a living,” Frank was saying.

This time, it came down to who could hustle. Who had a better chance of making it on the street.

Nina asked, “When can we see this street? Do you have one with you?”

And Jack was saying, “That’s all about trying to be some kind of scam-lord. Why would I want that? And don’t try to call it survival,” but the sparring had halted.

Bobby said, mostly to himself, looking away, “Put together a nice set of *income opps*, instead and don’t come back.”

Frank was still paused on Nina when Jack said, “The only hard part about what you try to do would be watching people get sucked in. Or maybe just staying interested.”

Frank turned to Jack. “Wanta put your money where your mouth is?” he asked, with a glance at the poker table.

Jack said, “So predictable...” and then looked around at the others.

Nina said, “Yes, let’s do some poker.”

Davie hung back on the way over to the table. Frank was saying something about the good old days. Only Davie seemed to be listening. Others were kidding each other about wild-west clichés. Somebody started singing, “*Don’t try to understand ‘em... Just rope ‘em, tie and brand ‘em...*” and some others joined in on the next line.

"Used to be, when I lost a job I'd just go out and get another one," Frank tried to say over the noise.

Bobby looked back and suggested, "After how many weeks in front of the TV?"

"You don't know anything about the real world ...not knowing where your next meal is coming from..."

Everybody was digging in their pockets for change. Nina stopped. "You've never missed a meal in your life, Frank. And why should you? Why should anybody? ...anywhere?"

This seemed enough for Frank to be smug. He looked around the table. Maybe picking out their resolve. "Who wants to deal?" he said, trying to break into all the happy chatter. Nobody responded. "Who wants to deal?" he asked again, several times, monotonously, but more emphatically each time and finally let his anger into it. "Who wants to DEAL?"

Nina picked up the deck and handed it to him. He relented slowly, shuffled a couple of times without paying much attention, put the deck down in front of Jack and said, "Cut," but got no response. He said it again, several times. It still didn't break their festive mood. "CUT the cards."

Nina said, "We trust you, Frank. Just deal."

"What?" Frank asked, flatly, trying to get her — or anybody — to name the game.

"Draw. Five-card," said Jack.

Everybody put a penny in the center of the table except Davie, who was sitting at the end of a long table nearby. Frank made sure they were all in and dealt the five cards to each. He turned to Jack again, on his left, and said, "Bet."

Jack said, "Check."

They all passed on the opening bet, until it came back around to Frank, who said, "Five," and threw in a nickel. When they were all in for the five, Frank asked Jack, "How many?" — the game's usual chance to trade in for a few better cards.

Jack said, "I like these."

Nina looked behind his hand and said, "Ooo, those are pretty. Look at these."

Davie said, "Hey," as they all started comparing and then trading cards.

Frank sat back, with his lower lip moving up over his mustache, as everybody but Nina and Bobby flipped and flung their cards at the center of the table, like the game with a hat. Nina watched Frank gather up all the cards and start to shuffle them, ignoring everything else. Bobby was watching Nina.

One by one, the table started emptying. Bobby hesitated, sober, quiet. Nina had left it to him to watch Frank shuffle. Jack stood waiting to hear what Bobby might say.

"Ever play in a band or anything, Frank? ...draw pictures?" Frank just did one strong exhale. "Do you have a camera? ...guitar?" It sounded almost as much like accusation as sympathy.

Jack interjected, smiling, "...a box with rubber bands around it?"

Then Bobby asked, more directly, "There anything you want to do sometime before you die?"

Jack gave Frank a small frown, which he then turned to Bobby, before going off with the others. Bobby got up and followed.

When they caught up with Nina, Jack put his chin down and smirked, "I didn't know it was loaded."

Nina said, "Cute," and then she asked Bobby, "Think he'll work it out?" But Jack answered.

"I don't want to be there when that wears off."

Bobby dropped into a big chair. "Where was I when all the really good self-deception was handed out?"

Nina said, "When are you going to start leaving bad faith to the experts?"

Jack added, "No DIY."

Nina wondered further, "Who needs you to feel like you're getting it all wrong?"

Bobby said, "Maybe not you..."

Jack might have redirected the point a little. “The other day, somebody tried to say, ‘*I can read you like a book.*’”

Nina smiled. “Did you ask them what page they’re on?” she said before looking back toward Bobby.

He started taking the hint, playing a role, but without much of the enthusiasm, “*Stay tuned to meet all of our contestants. Next, on this week’s Justify Your Existence.*”

Nothing quite resolved.

* * *

From where Nina sat, in an old office chair on the roof of the two-story women’s dorm, she could see lights on in the art extension — a school-away-from-school that was meant to make up for deleted curriculum in the local grade schools and high schools. The extension used a smaller portion of the same former army supply depot where the detention center had been set up.

Even though by this time, Jack, Davie, Nina, Bobby and all were out of high school — all but two having graduated — this didn’t keep them from spending most of their time at “the X” every day. It was “theirs” by right of having lobbied successfully for its existence and by the dubious right of — again — spending most of their time there.

The tricky part was that they were all postponing college indefinitely, which kept them from being able to legitimize their presence at the art extension by lobbying the local colleges to sanction it for what would be the next education level. Their status hadn’t been keeping them from getting a lot of work done over there.

It didn’t keep them out of “the camp” either.

Nina could see people working over at the extension, but that night, she didn’t climb over the fence. She had talked about considering some inevitabilities in her immediate situation. (She hadn’t been allowed to bring even her smallest keyboard.) ‘So... What? Read ‘em and weep?’

* * *

In part two:

Eight months later, along a fairly desperate trek across acres of tract homes, Nina would meet Mrs. Bert when she came up in front of the older woman’s house, crossing the highest point for miles around; just a couple of blocks of roadway rising above most of the rooftops and the rest of the suburban street network.

There would be Mrs. Bert and some of her friends and neighbors, tables and chairs set up out front on the lawn, up by the sidewalk where it turns the corner, having watched Nina come in out of the west horizon — a moving dot all the way down in one of the roads; grooves between the billowing roofs — Nina looking tired and determined to go out into the opposite horizon, but then she was easily persuaded to stop and rest, have something to drink, visit.

From there, Nina and Mrs. Bert would eventually go on to remake the culture and administration of the camp with a “...nicely disruptive lack of officious tactics.”

[My editors never ran part one, so they never saw part two.

-Morganstern]

Prolog

Subject: RE: Texts – Morganstern's Notes
From: "Tod Tompkins" <todt@dock editions.net>
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"
Reply-To: "Tod Tompkins" <todt@dock editions.net>
Date: Fri, _____ 14:47:25 -0700
To: "Helen Tompkins" <helentompkins@hhandmcc.com>

Sis,

In reply to:

> Bro,

> Here are the verbatim files in the case. Use the
> links on the HTML page attached, for web access.
> The password I gave you at dinner will be good for
> everything that you will need on our server. You
> are authorized as my consultant, without much
> formality.
>
> I know we weren't quite on the same page yet on
> your misgivings about "word-for-word," but I'm more
> comfortable than you are with your initial thought
> about, what, "readability?" (Do you people use that
> term?). Please just do what your professional
> attitude tells you.
>
> Your edited version should go no further than this
> office and I can handle these people. I'll
> represent you in any kangaroo inquisition among
> these yo-yos, if they indict you. WinkWink.
> Just relax, okay? Be my guest. Time to take a deep
> breath and check out the scenery. We'll handle any
> discovery problems, you handle the story. We're
> the lawyers. You're the artist.

A lot of people would consider "the artist" to be a dubious identity, but at least there's no artist-equivalent to lawyer jokes. I want to put an editor's note at the beginning – for my own continuity-of-thought, if for no one else's. And it's much easier to think toward a broad audience, so the note would be to "Whomever." It would also make more sense to anyone who got a hold of this later on.

Something like:

=====

I was given the material presented here by my sister, who is [a lawyer with; partner in?] [H, H, H, and McC], for the purpose of clarification. She has a personal interest in seeing it put in some kind of functionally coherent order to aid in understanding how her office might proceed in preparing briefs for their client: this man's erstwhile publisher. Some of its cursory nature is due to time constraints.

This "edition" was produced without the normal consultation that a writer has with his or her editor. John Morganstern was not available to me for any discussion.

I have tried not to interfere with what John Morganstern was trying to tell us, but as an editor of fiction, I felt that it was appropriate to revise some of the syntax and may have inadvertently distorted the meaning or intention in small parts of the original text, which I take full responsibility for. Very often here, phrases in sentences, or whole sentences that begin and end some sections were replaced to aid the basic continuity. There are several places where I might have gone beyond that. Let's just say that if I had several versions of any given thought, I might have used them to create transitions or otherwise aid the continuity of this manuscript.

I cannot take any responsibility for the veracity of the "reportage" in the original texts. As I understand it, there are legal questions as to whether or not much of this material was based on actual interviews, investigation and research. In fact, the writer himself may not now be clear on this — I am told that his mental state is an open question. What are collated here are pertinent digital text files of the magazine, newspaper and web articles sent to his publisher or posted directly into their news-engines on the web over a period of time framed by "the court" as well as digital text files that were found in his (legal?) possession at the time of his arrest.

In every other case, it would be a primary part of my job to rectify any inconsistencies in the text that I am given to edit. Here, that presents two problems. One is that we have no material to bridge any gaps that would be created by deleting any statements that are mutually contradictory. The other consideration that I would suggest is that rectifying the inconsistencies might obscure the answers to one of our most fundamental questions: Who is this guy? These notes present a man whose most enduring characteristic may be his inconsistency. (It is not for me to say whether this inconsistency is moral or merely factual.)

There are date-stamps throughout Morganstern's notes. They do not correspond to the actual chronological order of the events he describes, rather they indicate the moment when the note was originally made. Often what is crudely described on one day will turn up as complete and concise on another. I will make these my arbiter, whenever the later note is more cogent.

With that in mind, some notes could be put in an order much like a

journal, but he repeatedly indicates that he intended to use all of this material for a report, in book form, and it is clear – from the order of those notes that he managed to bring together in one roughly edited text file – that he intended to anticipate all of the significant events in the story that he wanted to tell by providing background ahead of each significant event. At times, these are in the form of news items. At others, they are more like journal entries.

A turgid section titled "Forward" appears to be one of the latest, if not the last, entry he made in what we are collectively referring to as his "notes." There are other notes near the date of the "Forward" that describe his version of being "on the lam" in the days leading up to his arrest. There is some confusion, in that he describes this time being a matter of weeks, rather than the six days between his disappearance and his arrest. I should point out that the arrest was not at all dramatic; a perfunctory footnote in the story. We do not have Morganstern's description and nothing would be gained by my describing it here.

I will be putting the notes in a meaningful rather than strictly chronological order. (I should mention that the journal-like entries are only a small fraction of these notes. The bulk of Morganstern's writing, following his "Forward" are not primarily autobiographical. The narrative takes up the story of various other people -- most of them closely known to one another -- told from a first-person perspective.) And I will be doing none of the nonfiction editor's job of checking facts; corroborating, substantiating and correcting any details in what we are told. This will be Morganstern's own version of the truth.

As always, I try to keep the relationship between the cadence of the manuscript and natural rhythms – heartbeat, the seasons: all that falls – in mind. In this edition, that may be strained almost to the breaking point for any but the willing.

=====

I could just put a couple of pages at the head.

-Yo' Only Old Bro

Tod Tompkins
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www.dockleditions.net/todt.htm

Subject: RE: Texts – Morganstern's Notes
From: "Helen Tompkins" <helentompkins@hhandmcc.com>
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"
Reply-To: "Helen Tompkins" <helentompkins@hhandmcc.com>
Date: Mon, _____ 22:38:27 -0930
To: "Tod Tompkins" <todt@dockeditions.net>

Bro,

Okay, yeah. You already know that this whole "edition" is a crutch for me, so indulge your own "continuity" needs at will. But strike the part about his mental state. We can't have you getting involved with any of that, in writing. That's hearsay from me and we need to keep it quiet until it's determined. We have someone here to investigate which of the stories that he submitted may not have been based on real sources and facts, so let's leave that to whomever, whenever.

Addendum:

The charges and suits have finally come down as various types of embezzlement (expense billings after the fact, the rental car, hotel accommodations and that last flight to San Francisco) and malfeasance (making it all up) At least for the time being, we will only be directly involved with any civil proceedings, behest of Morganstern's publisher [Ajax], but we'll accommodate whatever on criminal things. Competency has been ruled provisional. Don't worry about vouching, for now. We'll have burned across that bridge when it's behind us.

There are three weeks open in the share-rental on the beach house coming up soon and a month open later on. Either of those should suffice. Fair enough?

-Sis

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[John Morganstern's Forward]

I know the meaning of life. (The fevers that I'm having are not necessarily the cause of this naive presumption.) With that in mind, I am addressing this report to you who are living in the early part of this century.

New discoveries suggest that information about quantum relationships may be able to follow loops in temporal dimensions; that this kind of info can time-travel. Until now, the "language" of this quantum information was too complex to "decode." Some physicists have found that text messages can be "attached" to these streams of quantum information, to be read in the smallest wavelengths that make up universal background radiation, if they are ever detected. I can except any doubt you may have about this kind of "speculative" assertion, but then again, you *are* reading this.

Much of the most significant technology that we now use actually exists in your time. It is only the imagination to apply the necessary mechanisms that has been lacking.

This slapped-together hotel in what was once a place of true exile and then a word-symbol for exile — Siberia, but southernmost — is my final refuge. Raving away here in isolation has been my way of working everything out; putting this report together without bothering anybody. When my workflow becomes unstable, it doesn't delay anybody else. There are no thoughtless contradictions for me to argue with. No one has to be disturbed by what they might see in my face or hear in my voice. (I'd like my whole existence to be like one of those big flecked cotton hotel bathrobes that are compiled out of bits that rag-picker bots glean.)

Even in this somewhat less jaded and cynical, "imaginative" new time that I live, there are plenty of people that I wouldn't try to talk to about anything philosophical. That is the most important reason why I'm here in this frontier outpost, actually. Even today, newspaper and magazine editors are not prepared to deal with the kind of person whose reporting doesn't much stay with the facts when the facts are beside the point. Editors also have "cognitive" problems with my writing. There are lots of times when they don't consider for a moment that there is any possibility that I could actually believe what I've written. They figure it's all just syntax errors and chase after corrections for my phrasing. (I do make errors, but this should not be an excuse for changing the meaning of what I am saying.) My priority is to write in ways that involve real

imagination and real insight — hopefully yours — not the kind of insight you get from a rewrite of a press release.

Not that I have anything against facts as such. They are a great starting place for inspired thinking about making the world a better place. But some would say that “inspired thinking” is a euphemism for just making things up to suit the story without actually putting in the work to find the facts. (Besides: *“Who needs all that insight, anyway?”*) We see more evidence all the time that eyewitnesses are unreliable, so I don’t worry that much about what is merely said to have happened. And photographs could “lie” long before pixel manipulation.

(For instance: A camera’s strobe flash can make one person look grossly apprehensive when two people are about to shake hands, just by freezing an awkward instant early in their natural motion, if that person just doesn’t happen to be smiling. It might look like that person is hesitating to accept the other’s friendly gesture. If all we see is the tentative instant when one person is locating the other person’s hand, the apparent hesitation shatters the classic moment of acknowledging mutual trust.)

Nor do I exclude things that have actually happened, just on the basis of unwritten editorial policy (i.e. the current “group-think” of any particular editorial office.) Please don’t just completely accept my version of events either — there will be others. You definitely can’t figure my point of view, correctly, based on what’s been edited and published under my name in the past.

The story that I have been wanting to tell is about how some disaffected people changed a large primary component of the world we continually create. (Mass transportation was the one technology that resisted ballistic evolution, while all the others went straight up, on the curve.) Changing the world, in and of itself, is no big deal. It happens all the time. There’s a possibility though, that as time goes on, these changes happen with less wasted humanity. Something you may want to get an earlier start on.

It is now possible — just in the last few years — to guarantee a healthy subsistence for everyone in “the developed world,” only because it’s harder to configure the technology to make material subsistence scarce. The new scarcity — farther up the food-chain — is far more economically effective. We find it easier to apply artificial scarcity to marketing luxury goods. In fact “artificial scarcity” is one of our main parameters for defining “luxury goods.” Hate and bigotry have mostly been abandoned out of boredom with them more than anything else. (Those kinds of expressions are almost universally met, most places, with the same kind of reaction people have to something that smells bad). But we have honed “exclusivity” to finer edges that cut in more directions.

We have just about balanced the “need equation” in the “developing nations” by letting them solve all the leftover problems associated with actually manufacturing things. This has made it so that the “need equation” in the post-industrial nations can usually be balanced just by making policy changes; by legislating the “value-added” economy. We just busy ourselves with adding that value — creating experiences for enjoying products and selling *the experiences* to one another.

It’s no longer necessary to be compelled by anyone in charge to move on to the next project without completely accomplishing the previous ones, but a lot of people still choose to be led or prodded by stress. No post-industrial person has to be a hero to provide for themselves or anyone dependent on them (we have new ways to make you fret), but some people still try to find a way feel heroic. The average person has the means to make something complete out of the smallest suggestion, but even when it is important to them, they mostly don’t, unless it improves their position.

People should be more concerned about abdicating too much decision-making to the operational control systems, but they don’t see that robotic effectiveness doesn’t allow much for inspiration, even though people almost seem to be acting something like “inspired” lately. Most people think that the decline of world population is a good thing, but the consequences are still debated. Few people work through the details that might indicate whether or not very many of us are actually needed anymore or that soon far fewer of us may be needed by the people in the tips of the pyramids. (And we are still not sure that the nano-bots won’t auto-replicate themselves to the

point where they accidentally eat the whole biosphere.)

We could all take the time to enjoy daydreaming about the way that we fit in with everything else in a less material sense, but few people do. It's common knowledge that there are quiet-minded "disciplines" where you can get to the point of seeing your world at your preferred level of dissonance, but we are ever more conditioned by smooth, colorful trends that decide, for their own purposes, where the spikes come out. The biggest difference between this time and yours is that now we all participate much more directly in the perpetuation of those trends.

* * *

There is a whole new layering to the system of journalism. To put it briefly, for now, doing "news" can just be one aspect of anybody's set of "income opportunities." At one time, Hollywood was just a place; Madison Avenue was just a place; Fleet Street was just a place. Then they were each a state of mind (that would be in your day). Now they are all at the mall, every mall, everywhere on Earth.

Most "hard news" stories — politics, crimes, wars etc.— are reported by every kind of ad hoc group or faction with specified interests and the winners get the most attention or vice-versa. Among these, the stories that float out on top usually carry some person into celebrity, unless an existing celebrity had everything to do with making the whole thing newsworthy in the first place.

Disasters are covered by the survivors.

In your time, PR — the game of "adding value" as applied to product or "personage" information — was still a fairly distinct profession. It's not that self-promotion has become all that much more essential. It's that being in "the right place" has a lot more to do with actually helping to create the "right-ness" of the place. The place is still at the mall, but the mall is populated in a whole new way that goes beyond the occupations that existed in your time. You can't tell the employees from the shoppers — everyone is both, a lot of the time.

"Word-of-mouth" has become an entire way of life: Your interests, among your people, at your places, on your loop of the media network, shared with whoever loops into the PR "party" that you are part of, paid for by the "income opportunities" associated with the "products" at the party.

Think: Cosmic Tupperware Party.

Imagine every store as a Public Relations get-together. The new PR and "toss" journalism are beyond all the personal parlance of the web in your time (blogs, podcasts, guestchats etc.); beyond desktop publishing, to the point where now the classic writer-editor-publisher system has become only a "niche" business with a very different kind of financial margin; one where they have to include material products in their retail model, just like everybody else. These days you get far more than paper and ink as your magazine or newspaper, but it is roughly equivalent in its possibilities for recycling.

"Toss" technology embeds all of what makes up the same old digital processing and communications into sheets, combining it with mostly the same old newspaper pulp (reinforced with polymers to just the right deterioration rate), by printing the circuits and processors and pixels right onto them in layers, using the usual "presses" with a few modifications. Light-emitting and light-sensitive diodes and digital switching or data storage cells, along with grids of "wiring," are laid down by familiar ink-jet print heads that have been made industrial strength with higher resolution than you might be able to imagine, but the quantitative density of all this is just as intense as you would expect from the future. The "toss" papers appear, at first glance, to be just a few thick pages; not very rigid, kind of leathery in a bright and shiny way. Most people find them useful enough to not have any need for turn-of-the-century digital hardware — personal computers, PDAs or any of what you call peripherals: printers, phones, cameras, what have you.

Anything can appear on the sheet as detailed as anything that you have ever seen and can arrive there, updated, from just about any source. Video, still pictures and sound can also be captured from the real world by the "toss" itself. These can be networked to any server. (Science

fiction, huh?) The most significant feature is that they are cheap enough to trash when they get ragged. Think of them like the supposedly orphaned ball-point pens that you all graciously provide homes for. And like an empty ballpoint that you wouldn't even consider refilling, we "toss" them. (Calling them "trash" papers would insinuate that they are worthless in the first place and wouldn't indicate how freely they are passed around.)

I still use a notebook computer that would be familiar to you. Some of us are cranky that way.

No amount of technology will ever change the essential world of public relations, only the roles people play. Everyone is "press" and everyone is "PR" — more often than not, at the same moment. More than ever, PR can be thought of as a series of greater or lesser "parties" with an elaborate system of heavily staged "invitations" where the putative guests of honor — the product or person being sold — are introduced in detail: The Almighty Press Release, in multi-media. The multitude of underlings in all this industry — in the press and in the PR groups — keep busy revising and trading all the data from the product source, so that the conversation at the parties is spare and polished — everyone at the highest possible state of authoritativeness. When you are doing PR, you still put on a lot of "spin" and when you are being the reporter, you still hack away all the "window dressing." It was ever and will always be so. The result — as always — is that even the most extreme product/person-fantasy-fetish is completely fulfilled and the PR party is always a success.

Production and capital management systems (the corporate structure of the old-school "supply side") and what would have been "human resources" back in the industrial era are mostly software applications that run in the background now. Management, finance and professions — as personal roles — still exist, but they are on a layer that is even more distinct and "lofty" than in your time. (In ancient Egypt, there were only a few pyramids, by comparison. They were mostly about "the afterlife" and they had real, physical existence. We have a million pyramids. You just have to look harder to see them.)

To know where you should be and when, you put your ID in the network mill and the result you see will be where everyone's judgment currently has you obligated (by way of standard sampling algorithms). It's up to you to decide at what point-in-time the digital model of your projected schedule is unraveling or breaking down and no longer looks like it's going to be effective. Your confirmations and excuses go into the mill with everything else.

(It's not all a party — not quite. If you need any kind of professional assistance — a doctor or a lawyer, say — you will find that their "function web" is made up of lots of not-all-that-alien people who will hand you off to one another far more effectively than bureaucracies function in your time and today people accommodate you, not the plan they follow. Imagine being handed from one person to another across a "campus" that looks as though it is crowded with people milling around aimlessly, looking up from their "clipboard" occasionally to interact with you or to visit with someone mutually involved. Just don't stray too far from the culture common in their minds. It will probably only confuse them.

How's your function web doing?)

* * *

I hope you weren't counting on some kind of complete material Utopia. We still have a "consumer economy." It is not nearly so material though. Today every material product is "sold" through a "value added" system where most of what is being paid for or "comped" (made complimentary) is the ambiance and experience that has been arranged for "enjoying" the material product, or more likely the experience has been arranged for enjoying (worshipping?) some marketable person, ultimately. Think of it like the difference between buying some coffee beans from a farmer (or maybe eating some caffeine in pill-form), compared to the ambiance of the shop where you enjoy your favorite coffee product, while these days also associating that cup of coffee, in a seemingly intimate way, with someone who is a "star" in whatever happens to be your sphere of the moment. Add to that the requirement that you *participate* in the ambiance. Think what it

might be like do something like this in java joint-like “lounge” areas at a “big-box” store.

Today’s cup of coffee may cost the equivalent of a movie, but it may *include* a movie and the company of everyone who starred in the movie, who might also make a pitch to you about the company that catered meals on the production, along with pitches for other merchandise or IOs (Income Opportunities) that you may want to participate in. Today’s range of video info-tainment scales to every level of purpose, from a fifteen second stream ID to a “blockbuster” with all its sequels and “prequels.” These value-added experiences may be “comped,” completely or in part, depending on the level of participation that everyone else there allows you to have. If you’re the star, you have access to all the tools and everything there is free.

(In Mogadishu or here in Blagovesh, it might still be just the cup of coffee.)

I still haven’t said anything about the disaffected, the loners, the lost souls, the losers. But that’s always the problem, isn’t it? What do you do with those people; the marginalized people; the inevitable remainder in all the zero-sum games? We barely even have terms for talking about them. There are games that seem to be open, just as in your day, where even the losers can usually get by on scraps left by the relative winners. What do you with people who can’t even get into those — or who just don’t want anything to do with any of that? Do we dare to look at what that might be all about? And beyond all those people, there are the people who are just quietly marginalized — masses of people who hardly ever leave their houses or apartments; who hardly ever need to.

There’s no place like home?

An alternative to the social results of our quintessential informational economic engine — and some people who are living that alternative — are what this book will be about.

* * *

The original assignment I was sent out on to begin my current and lasting new trajectory was stale; a story that a more typical journalist would have been happy to do. But my editor was still trying to get things to work out for me. A trade-show in Las Vegas would be previewing “toss” technology products, but it would still mostly be about things that “toss” would eventually make obsolete. I was happy to go. I just didn’t have the conventional motives. I was inappropriately interested in the bigger picture.

There is a historical component to any forthcoming technology. More so, when that technology would be expected to be used to move ideas. The problem is that there is a reluctance about the ideas all out of proportion to the products. Still, for me — a remotely interested spectator with a “backstage pass” — a trade show can be a historical place to be. To my editors’ credit, they had become “early adopters” of toss technology, while almost all of the companies at the show remained heavily committed to the investment in their “legacy” products. To see all these people confronting a complete change in the way they would be doing things would be to see history being made, even if it meant I would have to be reporting on things that would soon be obsolete. I would be using incipient future technology to report on the latest technology of the past.

For about six years, while my editors and their publisher had gone out on a limb and had begun to buy into “toss” technology, they still put out a regular newspaper — one actually on paper, that is. But even then, they had advanced to an improved workflow. Their newspaper came together on just a small server in their office and was printed-out on machines all over the place, some in other countries. The writing assignments went out to people that they hardly ever met and by that time most newspaper circulation was “farmed out” to the printer (who could cover most of any given town using a machine that only occupied one small part of a space in a tilt-up-wall industrial park) using the same route drivers that once picked up the bundles at your newspaper factories. This last model of desktop publishing only continued a few years beyond the leading-edge days of toss technology “publishing.” (The idea was to try to dislodge and scavenge some circulation from the last remaining paper that monopolized the readers in any town by customizing your edition to suit wherever you were intruding.)

My editor and publisher managed to be ready with toss technology before newspapers were

finally completely supplanted by the web running on all the big and small boxes of digital hardware common in your time. (A few ink-on-folded-paper publications have held out, catering to the last trace of interest, even now.)

* * *

I have been “on the lam” — a mediocre fugitive — since the close of the trade show in Las Vegas that my editors had sent me to, now almost a decade ago. They had a plan. I had a plan, too. I had been expected to grope around on the floor of the show in their name, so that they had info that they could use to optimize the “face time” they would spend with industry people at the show. They had also worked a deal with an EU publisher where I was to be the eyes and ears that enabled them to present info as though it were they themselves who were streaming news from the convention center. I would be helping them to make it appear that they were running items about what they had learned in private audiences with the top people in companies that had a presence at the show. Unknown to them, the Europeans were actually expected to cover the entire cost for my being there, but the financial details were unsettled and would be sorted-out as things went along.

A week or so before the trade show, I got a message that included a basic travel itinerary and a web address for booking specific dates and times for my plane and hotel. At the bottom of the message, in plain sight, were the credit card numbers and expiration date for an account that my publisher used for expenses. All along the line, everyone had neglected to delete them before the message was sent on its way to me. They had essentially set up an “identity theft” on themselves for me. Normally, of course, that info would just be embedded and encrypted for use in a form on the travel agency website whenever an authorized person signed on. All I can figure is that someone had copied more than they had intended from some page and pasted it there without looking carefully. Maybe the problem had something to do with the pending financial arrangements. Maybe memory problems mean that we write things down that we shouldn’t.

When I saw the credit card info right in the plain text of the message, I knew exactly what my real itinerary would be: After the trade show I would eventually fly to the Manchu-Siberian SEZ, if I had any reason to believe that I would be caught. For a few weeks, I stayed one step ahead of the police by traveling to a new U.S. town every couple of days (paying only at the last minute), before using a ticket that would take me to this fine place — the new Special Economic Zone in Central Asia.

The reason I absconded was that it meant I would be free to put in the desk-time on a story that I have been making notes for on my own time for years. It seemed likely that I would be caught (the office manager would come across the bills sooner or later), but in the meantime I would be able to work on something close to my heart: a piece about some enlightened people and a “disruptive” transportation technology. Even if I had been assigned to work on it by any editor I could interest, there’s no way I would have been allowed to do “The Bigger Picture.” And my own editor would never have authorized me to work with the sources. He didn’t know that I was already on it. By the time any editor would want to see *my* notes, it would be a fait accompli (or perhaps the disclosure of this transportation system design would come years after the disruptive technology had been aborted by competing interests).

The story is too big — in scale and scope, if not significance — to have any relevance for the kind of editors that I have known. Parts of the story would fit on their pages, but there are times when part of the truth is not enough; when the facts of the matter aren’t enough of the truth; when anything less than the whole “Bigger Picture” is a travesty. At that point the journalist becomes an author — if he or she has the necessary resources. (You’re not surprised that we still have books, are you? Every medium lingers, just as in your day.) Most of these struggling times — now, just as in your day — the journalist is broke and obligated to a web of tentative, dubious connections. Forgive me for playing with the word, but this run-around shouldn’t be “news” to anyone. Nobody should equate journalism with living large, only living *at large*, and from my point of view, “The *at-larger*, the better.” We journalists want to take the leads that we get and head on down the

road to absolutely wherever the story goes (unless we are disillusioned — then the horizon is right up at the ends of our noses, where we can sniff out the least troublesome payoff).

Hotel rooms can be an ideal place to write, if you don't find whatever ambiance they have distracting. I spent my first night as a "fugitive," in a low-budget motel. Like a traveling sales rep with too much homework to do in your time, I started up my notebook computer, rather than switching on the equivalent of a TV. While that sales rep might be straining under a lot of mental baggage at that moment, it was my moment of complete liberation. Chasing after assignments, day in and day out, just to make a living, has never allowed enough undistracted time to devote to what I knew was happening just behind the curtain. I could finally get to work.

* * *

My agenda runs on what I find while looking for no less than the solemn face of a better world, even though it's probably a face that only a mother could love. Maybe we shouldn't neglect that kind of affection and then expect to live happily ever after. (How can all those mothers be wrong?)

The meaning of life, the reason that we are here, is to fulfill what is in our hearts. I think it's possible that if everyone had always worked from that premise, we could probably have avoided a lot of the "damage control" that has kept us so busy and distracted. We probably could have avoided the recriminations that escalate to evil — the kind that we imagine is only in *other* people's hearts. Would life actually be trouble free, without "Them?" We seem to have fewer of "Them" these days. We probably always did.

* * *

The window view that I contemplate from my third story room has the edge of the roof of the building just across the alley, with silvery and tarry roofing sheets folded over a low wall at that edge, and is otherwise filled with branches from trees, sometimes bare, nearby and in the distance, that I have hung with all sorts of shiny things that move in the breeze.

-John Morganstern
Blagovesh, Manchu-Siberian SEZ

Subject: RE: Texts - Morganstern's Notes [He never left]
From: "Helen Tompkins" <helentompkins@hhandmcc.com>
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"
Reply-To: "Helen Tompkins" <helentompkins@hhandmcc.com>
Date: Thr., 09:38:27 -0930
To: "Tod Tompkins" <todt@dockeditions.net>
Bro,

You wrote:

> Just so I don't look like an idiot, confirm: He
> never left the U.S.; never went anywhere other
> than Las Vegas and San Francisco.

No. Four days in Vegas and then the six days in San Francisco.

BTW: I talked to the publisher today. They were still worried that we would try to get them to work this up. The guy went off on something about being "ramped-up" on deadlines and why were we getting all creative? Like they're paying extra for this. Makes me that much more sympathetic toward Morganstern.

> You won't be surprised that our boy Morganstern
> isn't dissuaded by much comforting ambivalence. In
> these notes, he makes quite a stand. I suppose some
> might call it integrity, if it were real.

I know you're going to get carried away. Keep in mind: Our main job is to eliminate any possible liabilities -- to keep a lid on any claims made against the publisher -- and identify their property. They certainly wouldn't want you to enjoy yourself.

Keep in mind 2: We will be doing a word-search for anything "radioactive," so that's totally off your shoulders.

-Sis

Helen Tompkins
<helentompkins@hhandmcc.com>
<www.hhandmcc.com/~helenhome.>

Chapter One

June 16th, 2003, 4:30 a.m.

I was sitting in my car having a sandwich and some coffee from a thermos, in the parking lot of a little mall, backed up to the main entrance. Downtown was maybe ten miles away. A cop turned around out in the street after cruising by slowly to check me out, then turned into the lot and stopped at an angle in front of my car.

I'm getting used to being in the realm of "probable cause" a few times a week.

I had just dropped two bundles of Sac'to Weekly on the walkway behind my car. One for a rack just inside and another for somebody else to stock in a coffee place way inside. When the cop got near, I made sure to only move my hands toward where they could be seen and watched for a flashlight. But then a light on top of the cop car came on — very bright. I started hoping that this wouldn't be any more abrasive than usual. I know it's routine for these cops, but there's also the fact that they have guns and people do make mistakes. And this was happening often enough at some of my stops to make me wonder why they didn't share information about what I was doing. I was typically out-and-about like this, while everybody else was asleep (the streets were deserted from about 2:30 'til about 5:00), so I was meeting more cops than just about anybody else ever does. Over a period of four or five days at a time, they might be the only people that I had any encounter with. (*'Glad I don't have to meet all the people these cops run into?'*)

A lot of times — if I wasn't out of my car already — I would forget the danger, open my door and step out. Probably to avoid that driver's window scene that we associate with having actually done something unlawful. Once one of these scenes got going, it would start to seem arbitrary, if not pointless. I suppose I wanted to at least consider resenting it. (*'Trivia question: What was the first use of the term "probable cause" in American Law? Better not ask. In the Constitution.'*)

Every time, when discussion began, I would wave the packet with my name-tag/badge; press pass; driver's license and say, "Just dropping off some newspapers..." The cop might look over the little documents in their plastic envelop and usually say something simple, then we would each go back to whatever we were doing. (*'We should all try to enjoy these little moments.'*)

One time, at another place, there were two cops parked window-to-window, adjacent to where I pull up. There was no way for them to assume that I wasn't pulling in to talk to them, so I had to make the short explanation when one cop got out. (*'Not so bad.'*)

This time — at that mall way out of town — the cop seemed doubtful or maybe disappointed; walked toward me, turned to check out my car, then kept turning in the direction he was looking and headed back to his car, while I was saying, "Just having lunch before I hit my next stop." His turnaround was like a dance move. He drove down to the end of the parking lot and stayed there until I left. I tried to remember that in some concrete way, the time-of-day actually mattered. If I had been hitting the road before 5:30, the freeway would have been clear as far as I could see, but none of the places with real coffee would have been open. If they had been open all night, I would have spent a lot more time out in the world.

My main occupation at the paper was "fact checking," which involved a lot of what you might think would be an editor's job. Call me a "copy editor," if you like, but even that's not it. I would not have wanted to identify myself with any of the "editor" level of things. I Didn't even want to get *that* close to making "editorial policy" decisions. Certainly not after-the-fact; making somebody's writing fit "our" slant. In that office, it was easy to get diverted from any objective criticism to just plain bickering. My job was about things like full and correct nomenclature, chronological continuity, precise locations, respected hierarchies and spelling: things you could look up, if you had time. I was working at night so that I had the widest possible horizon. It was a way to avoid having to spend all my time on the phone (my answering machine took most of the return calls while I slept), but the writers could always count on being up-to-date with anything that

had to do with the story they were developing, first thing in the morning, every morning, if the sources were responsive.

That day, there was second police encounter. It came about in the side parking lot at the building where the newspaper offices are. I was waiting for the Thursday morning meeting — the day after publication — just long enough to see if they needed me to be there. It was also a good day to stay awake on into everybody else's daytime, so that I could run a few errands. The only reason I mention all of this is to indicate how and why I happened to be at the editorial office on that June morning; to explain my unwelcome presence.

When I arrived, a lot of the lights were on and the janitor's truck and some equipment were outside the door that led to the dumpster. A car with a couple of cops came into the lot. They passed me, with a glance, stopping at the truck. Both got out and one looked in the windows and the shell on the back of the truck with a flashlight. By that time I was out and I heard them following me as I went around the corner to the front of the building. They came up the steps right behind me. (*'Do I seem like I belong here? Name-tag in a pocket. They ready for me to reach in for it? Better let them give me a cue.'*)

I stepped back from the door without them having to say anything. One of them tapped on the glass door with her keys. When the janitor came and opened it, they went in and one held the door open for me, after taking a quick look at my tags (one of which had the same logo as the one on the outside of the building). They ran their "probable cause" routine on the janitor, who had apparently set off the alarm. Without a password to give to them over the phone, the alarm company has no choice but to have the police investigate. I still hung back, in the waiting room/lobby between the editorial and sales offices.

While biding my time, I looked over the pop trash taped inside the glass door to the sales office. I obsessed a little over one of the Christmas cards that was lingering there, well into the late spring. The card featured Rudolf The Red-Nosed Reindeer. I stood there trying to resolve the tepid irony on the card: "...used to laugh and call him names... ...you'll go down in history..." and all that, over and over, while the janitor sorted things out with the police, who seemed to be giving him the benefit of the doubt. (*'Rude Boy, life is good? Or is it just unrealistically convenient? What are you doing here in June, Rudy? Are they working on some new reindeer game? Somebody get this deer a drink.'*)

When the police left, I promised the janitor I would plead his case for being allowed to have a password when the authorities — my editors, Hal and Rod — arrived. Then I sat down and looked at some magazines. My editors came in late, so I figured there would be no meeting. It was an uncommon opportunity to have a conversation with Hal, but I had no abiding agenda, other than the alarm thing.

"Hey John!" Hal greets everybody by name that way; like he's glad to see them.

I overlooked it and told him, "Your janitor accidentally set off the alarm and he doesn't have a password to give the alarm company so the police were here."

Hal had already gone back to what he was working with as he walked in. He looked up and said, "We'll have to tell him not to set it off." I asked him if it wouldn't be easier to just give him a password. He said, "Does everything have to be easy?" He picked up an elaborate folder and opened it. (*'Why do we still put office things on paper?'*) "And why are you still here?" he asked, in a tone slightly less rude than the question.

Rod — the only other person who worked in the editorial office — interrupted. "Hal, there's something breaking about guns at a high school."

Hal put up the palm of his hand to me and said, "Get Guy on the phone. Give him the situation and then let me talk to him."

Being a weekly, we didn't do breaking-news/front-page kinds of things, but background was essential to the bigger picture we assumed to cover.

I wasn't paying close attention or ready to let go of the bone, on the alarm thing. It seemed worth a friendly debate. "What do you do when you accidentally set off the alarm?"

That just got me a small ugly look from Hal. Rod started to tell Hal what was going on.

Hal said, "No. I'll get it from Guy."

Rod said, "He's not answering." and was still looking down at his phone.

Hal turned to me. "John. Go down there, but don't talk to anybody."

"Hal?" I said.

"You know what I mean," Hal said. "Just get facts. I want details before they have time to agree on a story. Call me."

* * *

When I got to the high school, I found out that it was also the last day of school. It was immediately obvious that what little scheduled routine there might be had been abandoned. A crisis-torrent of people was sweeping through the immediate area — filtering through cars that weren't all parked carefully — into the school buildings. My assumption was that these people were parents and school district administrators. I tested that idea on their appearance and found I was satisfied with the incongruity. (*'It takes all kinds. What would be enough?'*)

There were six or eight empty cop cars and a fire truck, with one guy, in the driver's seat. The only other people who weren't in the flow into the school were three EMT crews, at-ease by their ambulances. One was calling it a day and climbing back in to depart. They were on their way before I got to the building that was the center of attention, but there was a reluctance about the speed they were going, even after they had cleared the few cars and pedestrians that were still heading in.

I figured that the professional thing to do would be to identify the mood, but it was too diverse for just a news item or a terse note to Hal. There were small groups where one person might be in something like hysteria; others where people were acting almost festive. Mostly though, the mood was static: stunned or maybe just not ready to commit to any kind of response. It was like what Hal had expected: They definitely hadn't agreed a story. But I would have bet there wouldn't be one; that everyone was working out what the incident could have been: matching-up the actual situation on some generic media template they might have gleaned from reports of similar occasions at other schools and then having to rewrite the ending on their own. I was glad I didn't have the immediate responsibility facing all of my "colleagues" who would either be there, or would be on the story at their desks over the next few hours.

I looked at the layout of the interior of the building the cafeteria was in: One long hallway with windows on the south side and doors on the north. The first door I came to opened into a typical lunchroom with chairs at long tables. I could see a doorway connecting that room to another room that had its own door out to the hallway — the next door along the hall. I walked into the first room and looked for any kid that might possibly make sense. I caught part of a conversation: "...that they had called off the evacuation." (*'I should hurry up. Guy's right behind me. Be here in a minute. No. No hurry. All over half an hour ago. Guy's problem.'*)

I asked the nearest likely person, "What happened here?"

"Herb, um... Smith came in here with some guns, but he didn't shoot anybody," was the answer I got.

I asked, "Why not?"

He said: "There're these guys... They always hang out together and..."

Another kid overheard and said, "They're in there. It was the girl." (*'It was the girl... '*)

I had noticed people looking in through the doorway that connected the main dining area and the smaller meeting/class/lunchroom. They would look in and then walk away quickly. Out in the hallway, I had also noticed a man in suit pointing down the hallway, opposite from where we were all coming into the building. He and a uniformed cop were interested in the doorway from the extra room into the hallway.

Just before I got to the door between the two rooms, a man in casual clothes carrying a large radio and another cop walked out. They looked me up and down as they walked on by. I had my credentials hung around my neck, but they might just as easily have been a pack of lottery tickets or grocery store coupons.

When I got inside, the two men by the other door to the hallway were gone, as well. The whole thing had begun to feel like a miniature, indoor kind of Dealey Plaza. Maybe that doorway was their "Texas School Book Depository."

I could see why everyone turned away: The look I got from the group of kids standing together across the room said, "Leave us alone," but I took three steps into the room and waited for a more determined response. Eventually they were all watching me except "the girl." ('*Nina. Her name is Nina. Where... ?*') I decided that I would leave it up to her. So had they. She looked in my direction to see what everyone else was distracted by. The look I got from her was something like relief. She glanced around at the others and one of the guys waved me forward. I had seen her somewhere before and remembered her name, but I was sure I had never talked to her. I started toward them again and there was no hostility. It was comfortable. Everything had slowed down.

I introduced myself to the whole group. It was more like announcing who I was, than like being friendly. I held my credentials out from my chest and said, "John Morganstern, Sac'to Weekly." When I said this, she looked puzzled.

I softened my approach when I spoke to her. "Nina, right?"

She said, "*I know you.* You were at the meeting about the art extension." It was a little like the delayed response from someone who just woke up, but then she was more direct. "You're a reporter? I thought you were just a troublemaker." This was obviously meant to just be offhand and was almost there. It sounded conspiratorial: one "troublemaker" to another.

The simplest thing I could think to say was, "Not all day," trusting that the ambiguity would be welcome.

Nina looked around at the guys with her and some of them drifted off. One pulled a chair around to the end of the nearest table, not facing directly toward Nina and I. I looked over my shoulder. The others — and someone else who had just come in — sat down at a round table in the corner between the two doors.

Nina seemed to be averting her eyes from the side of the room where I came in, whenever she glanced up to judge my face, so I maneuvered around to put all that empty space behind her. (It also meant I might be able to see Guy arrive.) Then I tried asking her about the incident. "You had something to do with what happened?" She didn't answer, looking thoughtful, looking at the floor, the way I had seen her from across the room. "How are you doing?"

She said, "I have no idea," and forced a tight smile, without looking up. "Probably not the way I'm supposed to." Then she added "I hate Mondays." This I tried to overlook. She undoubtedly knew that it was Thursday.

"Nobody wants to take you anywhere for some counseling or... ?" I was trying to be helpful, but I was still feeling obligated to get the story.

"Um... Well, they know me..." She looked up and faced me. "So, you weren't at that meeting as a regular citizen?" Changing the subject surprised me. ('*Why we would want to talk about me. Where can we go with this?*') Maybe she needed more time to find an orientation.

"Yeah. Let's talk about something else," but things were still a little awkward.

Nina said, "Oh, the guns."

"No, something other than that," I said, "Time enough for that later."

Nina said, "That's what I told Herb. The kid... ?" She wasn't sure I had heard the name yet. "The guy with the guns," she said and then went on "...like I was pretending to be some kind of hostage negotiator."

"And he bought it..." I suggested.

She thought for a moment. "Nobody else will. That pretending was a good way to... to whatever."

I said, "You'll figure it out." ('*You're not dead.*'')

Beyond Nina, I saw Guy on his way toward us. This made me want to get away quickly. "Ohp. Here comes my replacement. Act clueless or he won't know what to do," I said and started to walk away. But took a last look at Nina. She looked apprehensive.

I didn't sort that out quickly. It seemed uncharacteristic. When I got to know her, I saw that

there were times when she didn't look all that sure of herself; her dark eyes down, under her brow; her hair a curtain on each side. At least a part of her was ready to be elsewhere. She had a private sense of what her responsibility to any thought might be and all you knew of that was the way she closed up, for just a moment.

I just knew that there was a lot more than the gun incident that I wanted to know about. To keep the conversation open, I said, "Can we get together later? Tomorrow or...?"

Nina looked up; came back. "Yeah. Or later today. I want to talk to you about it."

I told her she could call me or send me an email message and gave her my card.

"We have a place." I wondered what that meant, but that would have been another whole conversation and that could also wait. "Just let me leave a message on your phone, later. I'll tell you how to get there."

"Later," I replied, still anxious to avoid standing there as Guy's lackey or worse. "I'll just be doing some notes at my desk. I'll drop whatever I'm doing." (*Doze for a while. Eat something?*)

* * *

When I got to the park Nina had named, I could see her from the street, on the far side of a bare gravel area that was probably a parking lot at one time. On one side of the open space, there was a new looking walled-in housing development that seemed to dominate whatever use the space may once have had. All that could be seen of the houses were blank walls of their upper floors, with a row of large, almost frameless windows, well above a fake adobe brick wall. There couldn't have been much of a yard back there. On the other side of the gravel area was a much older, very simple, almost treeless park.

Nina was sitting with some other people under a corrugated metal canopy, just under some overhanging trees, in a shady area of the park where the grass and gravel gave out, before a grove of ancient oaks. The canopy was six posts in the ground and a roof about nine feet high. Nina waved and closed her notebook computer. Three of the same guys that were with her in the lunch room got up, nodded to me, and left in the direction of the new houses. I looked after them, a little hopefully, then turned back to Nina and asked, "What is this?" pointing at the roof.

Nina said, "Supposedly some old men had it built and didn't like it."

My guess was, "Bocce ball, or maybe horseshoes. Too low? You got away pretty fast."

"What could they do, arrest me?" said Nina. "Sometimes we drag the tables in here out of the sun or rain." There were five other picnic benches between there and the street, arranged outside of a cyclone fence around a softball diamond. "We're usually here when there isn't any."

"Sun," I said.

"Or rain," she said, flatly. Apparently, we were both ready to get on with the conversation.

I asked, "What did you think of Guy?"

"I think he could tell we were waiting for an intelligent question. You should have stuck around to see the way the boys stared-down the TV people." She asked me, "How did things go, back at your office?"

"I didn't go back there. Not particularly welcome," I said. "Nobody is, but that's another story."

Nina said, "Later,"

I added, "I'm here to hear yours."

"You heard all about it from other people, right?"

"Not the parts that I'm interested in. I heard people talking about it, but I wasn't paying close attention. I don't actually want to know the news version."

Nina said "Let's just hope they don't make a video game out of it," and allowed herself a smile.

I smiled in support and then asked, as though pleasantly mystified, "Who are you?"

Nina said, "That could be a '*digression*,'" giving the word her own momentary meaning.

I asked if that was good or bad.

Nina said, "How much do you want to know?"

"Whatever you can tell me about how you got to be somebody who can, literally, disarm somebody," I said.

"It wasn't me. It was us. I just did all the talking. They let me do that, cuz I'm the girl or, you know, something like that," making it sound half true.

"What, whenever there's a bad scene?"

"Whenever something needs to be explained, discussed."

I saw that I should just let her do this her way. "Okay. I've been figuring I'll want to know about all of you, but let's start with you. What made you able to do your part?"

"First of all, Herb would probably be pissed at me for saying so, but I don't think he ever intended to shoot anybody," she said. "And the boys were right behind me." (*'The boys... Who might that include, altogether?'*)

I wondered if they were part of Herb's plan, if I could assume that he had one. "Is that a place where Herb would normally expect to find you? Do you hang out there?"

Nina said, "No, never. The lunch rooms are dreary. We were talking about some things going on and we noticed Davie in there and one of the things had to do with him, so we stopped and we weren't really paying much attention to where we were."

"Did your guys try to do anything?"

"No. I think it's about who they are. The opposite of who Herb had in mind, assuming he any intention to shoot anybody."

(*'How disturbing do you think it would be to consider that you are wrong? Better bring up a slightly easier reality.'*) "People around the actual shootings always talk like it came out of nowhere; that the shooter was unlikely," I said.

"Well, we're assuming that they're telling the truth. No, that they know what they're thinking. Maybe they just want to believe that, for a hundred reasons... Need to."

I just said, "Yeah," hoping that she would then feel free to develop that thought.

"Here's what I want to believe." Nina sat a little more upright and said, "When I read about Columbine... I'm not totally up on every single one of these things, but I will be... Anyway, when I read about those guys and read about other things like that, there was a lot of talk about 'self esteem issues,' as they say. We don't get into that. And everybody knows it. We watch all that kind of stuff from the sidelines — contests like that." She checked my face for recognition. "I guess Herb was being humiliated and bullied, but not by me. Not by us."

"Somebody like Herb might walk around for weeks suspecting that somebody's been taping signs on his back that say, 'Loser,' and that everybody's laughing at him. But it's not like we're going to say, 'Dude!' and help him get them off his back. The whole thing would just be too stupid to even laugh at. If he told us about it, he might get zero response. Maybe after a while, he just loses the thought."

I was a little uneasy with what I figured might be an important part of this conversation. I asked her, "Are we going to have to get into what 'cool' is? What with my being old and all..." And, of course, being old made this bit of sarcasm that much more difficult.

Nina had a ready answer for this. "If your life looks better than a strip mall, you're cool. Even if you were my age, I'd still tell you that age only comes into it when it's got baggage. The cable TV/magazine version of 'cool' comes with a lot of baggage. I think everybody knows that's my attitude." She added, "There are a lot of original things you can do, just by ignoring all that." And more: "If you have to ask yourself whether you're not just responding to market research, you probably are. That's where we get all the baggage."

"And I think we can say that most kids will try to create as much trouble for each other as possible. Even their friends. Like it's a duty."

(*'Okay... '*) "So Herb was carrying around a lot of baggage..." I suggested, trying out the easy inference.

Nina said, "Yeah, I don't know... The local kind, without a doubt. That's where I want to put

the blame, anyway.” But she seemed not to have completely resolved this. “All I know is that the baggage almost always winds up being a substitute for what you really want out of life and that it’s no accident. Style enforcers just pile it on. Nothing accidental is allowed. I get annoyed...” She stopped herself.

I was surprised at this much abstraction. I could see that she had thought about all of this in rhetorical terms. Maybe she hadn’t ever had the circumstantial opportunity to make it one big thesis.

“No mutations,” I offered, hoping to sound “aware.”

Nina repeated, “Mutations...” trying it out, and then went on, getting to the point. “Herb could have been hanging around with us instead of wherever he got all those guns. We’d have just ignored anything he was into that had baggage, until he lost interest in that stuff too.” (*‘How does that work?’*) “It’s been known to happen,” she said, as if fending off any doubt that I might have.

Right about here, I was given a role to play. I became a convenient stand-in the average narrow dolt, as well as someone wanting to find some refuge. And now I was sure that all the rhetoric had to do with Nina finding her regular equilibrium; balancing that day’s unthinkable with the most thoughtful kinds of rationalization she had. I know I wasn’t ready to be entirely conscious of what could have happened, so we were both grabbing at reason, however speculative.

“The last thing we’re going to do is try to force anybody down to the bottom of some list.” Nina said. “Really boring,” and then tried some more theory. “We’re not going to try to advance human evolution by mauling your ego. We’re not going to jump to any ignorant conclusions; contradict your rationalizations, just to watch you squirm. Nobody here is going to try to force you into making the wrong move,” she said, “only to find that you’re working without a net.”

She looked at her hands, finger tips close, on top of the table; tilted her head and sat back a little. “If somebody wants to drink and drive...” Then she quickly added, with just a pause to turn her head and a little smile, “...umm... around in circles in an empty parking lot with the lights off...”

I continued to play my role. “A lot of people might suspect that you are the kind of person who might be working without a net; a danger to yourself, if not others.”

“*Teenage nihilism...*” None for me, thanks. I don’t want to think that life is defined by how close you are to death.” She said “Today is not going to be who I am,” emphatically and then resumed her point. “There are other ‘venues.’ I’m just saying you might have to work out the impulses.”

“Such as...” I felt no need to tighten-up on the discussion; no need to consider any dramatic contradictions between the way we were talking and what had happened that morning. There might not even be any.

Nina asked me (or whoever), very slowly, “What would you want to do... after you got tired of all the things you *thought* you’d like to do... if you had everything you wanted and/or needed?” She looked at me to see if I got it, then said, “We kind-of do those things.”

I suggested, a little out of step, “I win the lottery and get a second chance to squander all of it...”

Nina nodded and kept going. “And these things are not always graceful. They’re harmless, but you wouldn’t think so, the way people react sometimes.”

“How so?” I asked. She was veering toward vague, but I let her decide about that. She gave it some thought and I gave her whatever time she needed.

“We don’t keep awkwardness on a leash. But we think it — awkwardness — is prettier that way. Unleashed” Nina said. “When you think you’re appreciating things that other people don’t even see, it’s real convenient to have friends who have a mutual respect for idiosyncrasies,” she said. “I got involved with the music part by making noises that sort-of ricocheted all over the school.” I gave her a puzzled-enough look. “They gave me a microphone. The band was playing at school — an extracurricular event.” (*‘The music part.’*)

“Was it well received?” I asked.

“You can’t go by that. They’re not gonna say what they really think. But, yes, judging by the

attention we got, they liked it. The rest of the day was just so totally show-biz. Trained animal acts. Sometimes everybody feels as subversive as us. They were temporarily in the mood. We want you to think we might always have other motives. Not just when it's convenient."

I could relate to that. "When I was in high school, there was an amateur talent contest at a big outdoor shopping mall, around a big concrete courtyard/empty fountain thing. There was a band that had some real fun and subverted the whole thing; making a lot of noise and jumping around."

"Hippy music?" asked Nina.

"No," I said, "it wasn't rock, exactly."

Nina said, "It wasn't punk," and must have figured it was too early.

I said, "Yeah, this was eight or ten years before all that, but it was rude for its day. The thing was, that everybody got into it, because the the show and all the other acts were so tired and insipid. The audience smelled blood. So this band got all the audience enthusiasm and won the fifty bucks or whatever, but the promoters wouldn't give them the money — not at first."

Nina said, "Yeah, that's right about where we were. And some of the faculty and administration were trying so hard to be, like, 'We're cool with that,' with all the conventional bad boys. People just don't know when it's time to really go outside and still really think about who might get hurt. I suppose if everybody loved harmless, bizarre, random things, it would be the end of the world as we know it."

"What if I just don't get it?" I asked, back in my role.

"I think everybody gets it. Some people are just over-invested in 'normal' things, or tragic things." She restated this. "The tragedy of things."

"Examples... ?"

"Have you ever been into something that defies 'common sense?' Something you really like, while at the same time you wouldn't or can't identify with it at all? ...or into things that most people would find annoying — even people who want to think of themselves as 'out-there'?"

"A guilty pleasure," I suggested.

"No. More like a 'sarcastic pleasure.'" She said, "That doesn't *have* to be a problem. It *can* be, but it's hard not to find the reactions arbitrary. And you know, in the wrong hands — between certain groups of people — these things can become life-and-death situations: Tragedy. Instead of all that, bizarre things can be about harmlessness — still have a purpose."

"A harmless purpose..." I said, just as a polite interjection.

After taking a glance at my attention, Nina gave me an honest sigh — hopeful resignation — and said "I'm just trying to come up with alternative ways to look at what happened this morning," as though I might not be agreeable, for the sake of holding to her point, however tenuous she may have felt. A quick desperate look crossed her face.

I thought she was doing fine; that she should stick with it. "Don't worry about me," I said.

She tried a new thought; one more approach. Probably just to actually make sure I got it; to make sure anybody would get it; to make sure it could be defined. "When I was a little kid, I went to this house with my parents — an uncle or something — and he had a collection of bottles from some whiskey company. They were little statues and sculptures — in glazed ceramics — of things like fire engines, U.S. presidents and whatnot. No apparent coherent theme. They covered the walls, filled some glass cases. And the uncle or whatever said, at one point, 'God, these things are stupid,' and I immediately altered my original impression. I knew, for sure, that he had all that in perspective and knew how to enjoy things ...that he knew how, I mean."

"What about tragedy, then?" I asked.

"That would be if he didn't know how. Or if he didn't have anything to be into that way. Or if he was seriously into it and somebody else was seriously *not* into it." She let it go at that.

I brought my real self back into the picture by saying, "So, there are times when you prefer to create your own experiences."

"Pretty much all the time, actually," she said. "I'm not saying that I — we — don't run into problems..."

"Like... ?"

"Trying to tell people about things, sometimes. When things have gotten... tragic."

"Not today," I interrupted. "You just had a genuinely traumatic experience. Nobody would expect you not to want to talk about it." It was a standard statement, but adequate.

Her face became blank. "That all depends..." She said, "Let me show you something," and she opened her computer. She worked it for a moment and turned it toward me, as she was saying, "I'm pretty sure I had another experience that was just about as bad as today. One that I think I have pretty much sorted out."

The screen showed just one picture. The image looked like a photograph of a painting. "You paint?" I asked.

Nina said, "It's a screen print. Just three colors. Three layers."

There was what looked like an elaborately decorated cowboy boot, floating in some stylized little waves against an indistinct, dark background; some planks and bushes, vertical.

"It's a kind of collage made from three photographs, in photo-resist. I like the heavy ink on the paper."

I looked up from the screen. Nina still had little expression. "There was a critique in one of my classes and I tried to tell them what it was about. At first, they kind of assumed that it was just some kind of fashion graphic, like for a magazine ad. All about looking at it formally. 'The background needs something,' and stuff like that."

I asked her what was important about it. She said, "This image was stuck in my head for years — constantly, for a month or so after it happened and then gradually less. For a long time, I could close my eyes any time and there it would be. I wanted to know why it was there, so I tried to make art out of it."

I offered, "They weren't interested in what the picture was about..."

Nina said, "In a way, the fact that they didn't want to hear about it made the situation complete. I need to know exactly where I want to put my effort. I can't even read anything lately without questioning it. I'm looking for any way I can talk back." (*'Have to say it, to get it. Why is saying it... ?'*)

Nina went on. "When I saw the last screen layer — when the print was all there — I knew I would never go back; that I would do art to clarify things, but those people needed to not think about it. It was just excess information for people in an art class. Like the picture was about form and the form was working okay for them; that that was enough. That time, I knew not to push it, but I shouldn't have to."

I brought up a likely contradiction. The picture is more than its 'look,' but that's not baggage..."

Nina said, "I don't want to think so. Not if it's, like, 'local.' If it doesn't dead-end in some trivial art-world or fashion thing. But, like I say, I can actually enjoy the dead-end stuff, if we all keep in mind that we're bypassing all the baggage for what it is. When all the marketing stuff is competing for space in my brain — in everyone's brain... Everything on all the magazine covers in the checkout at the grocery store..." I waited to hear if anything would follow the thought; if she would pull it together. Her face brightened. She said — mocking me a little — "I like what you told the school board: 'The other half isn't being nice about it.'"

I said, "Well, the last thing they want to think is that they've overlooked something."

Nina said, "They've heard people saying, 'You're only educating half a person,' often enough to have rationalized for it, but they never make the big connection. They probably think they can't afford to. It's all budget with them."

"You mean they can't afford it philosophically? We know they don't have any money," I said.

* * *

Nina had been at a school board hearing on art curriculum, when I had said to the board, "The next time you have a chance, look around you. The half that you're not educating, the creative

half, isn't being nice about the situation."

She had walked up to their table at the front of the room and introduced herself and she put a sheaf of papers in front of them. I assumed that it was some kind of petition. She hadn't said anything else for the rest of the meeting. I had seen her as being patient-with-the-futility. She had gone back to her seat and folded her arms, without having made eye-contact with anyone on the board or in the audience.

I was there as a reporter, but it looked like neither side of the debate was seeing the big picture. There had been some discussion of how students spend their time and I had wanted to point out that what we used to call "juvenile delinquency" is getting more and more "creative."

One of the board members tried to make an absurdity about what was being suggested — not just by myself. "So instead of taking them to Juvenile Hall, we should take them to an art class?"

I took that on. "Something like that. Or maybe you prefer inspired new variations on the drive-by shooting theme. Besides," I said, "jail has become part of their folklore." Maybe none of these people had overheard people younger than themselves worshipping "stars" who had been in prison or were headed there.

At another point, another board member tried to obscure this kind of reasoning, by appealing for practicality: "We need to concentrate on effectively preparing these students for the job market. We have to use what little money we have ensuring that these kids have a future."

I said, "What we're suggesting may be the cheapest way you can do that." Maybe they sorted some of the inference.

A third board member tried another way of saying that creativity is a personal problem. "What is there to prevent them from pursuing these 'beneficial' things on their own?"

"Nothing but your lack of faith and support," I said. "Does it surprise you how easily they decide that they don't need it?" I didn't think they were getting this, but I went ahead with it anyway. "You take away all the opportunities for these kids to work-out the right thing to do, as an abstraction, and so a lot of them just take it out on the street. The abstractions going on in the streets are always going to be that much harder for you to follow and no one is going to care about making subtle distinctions clear for you, only among themselves. The only obvious thing will be that you won't like it and that they won't care. If you think you're smarter than these kids, see if you think you can make the connection." Then I tried to make it more personal for them, saying, "This has been building since you were kids. If you give them a chance, they might have answers where you've forgotten that there's even a question."

This is verbatim from my note recorder. I might have been able to say all this more effectively in writing. There was some embarrassment all around about my own moment of creativity here. An audience member broke the silence by mentioning studies showing correlation's between "arts" classes and resulting motivation in "fundamental" classes. It's more direct than the way she was putting it, though. The fact is, if you ask students to show you the value of what they are doing, they will have a personal motivation for being articulate, maybe even scientific. Skills that will definitely come in handy for any of them. That is, if you haven't already lost them

* * *

There in the park, It was warm, as twilight came on — still and quiet. I always try to get outside on hot days just as the sun is going down. It always reminds me of relaxing with friends after a full weekend of making things happen.

Nina said, "That band you mentioned..."

I said, "The Geeks... ?"

Nina was delighted. "The Geeks? Really? Great name. Can we use it?"

I said, "You'd have to ask them."

Nina smiled. "Let me guess: They did computer music..."

I said, "No, no. They..."

"I know, I know..." she said. "'You hand in your ticket and you go watch the geek,'"

quoting a song from way before her time. “Just kidding. Fact is, we do. I mean, we use computers, but we can jam with sounds we have on them and use regular stuff too — guitars, drums, keyboards — in real-time. Not a viable option back then, right?”

I thought about it. “Yeah. I don’t know if they would have. They did a kind of ‘hybrid’ thing once: some Geeks and some guitars from another band and one who wasn’t even a musician. Called it ‘Shemp.’ You could use that.” (*Gotta find out what Mal’s up to.*)

Nina said, “Some university boys had a trio called ‘Jane, His Wife.’”

I thought about other Jetsons denominations “‘Their Boy, Elroy’ or ‘Daughter Judy.’”

Nina suggested, “How ‘bout ‘Whitey and The Beave.’”

I said, “Hm?”

“I want to do a song with the line: ‘Put your foot on the lady’s thumb, Beave,’ about an episode of ‘Leave it to Beaver’ where The Beave and Whitey are trying to find out how they got steam to come out of a coffee cup on a billboard. Whitey is telling Beave what to do as he’s climbing up. At one point, Whitey says, ‘Put your foot on the lady’s thumb, Beave.’”

“You were going to ask me something... about The Geeks,” I said.

“Oh. Anything else you can tell me about what they played?”

“No. Any one specific thing would mislead you. Even a combination of things,” I said. “They made a record — an LP, vinyl. I’ll toast a CD for you.”

Nina persisted. “What did they listen to?”

I didn’t think that would work either. “Charlie Parker listened to country-western. What does that tell you?” I asked her. “It all came from someplace else. Everything did. You know: The remoteness. Outer Suburbia. Paying attention to anything that came in on the tide made it something it wouldn’t be if they had ignored it, wherever it was on the charts.”

Nina said, “Remote like this?” She offered the gravel area and the walled development with the palm of her hand.

“In its own way.” I tried to think what any obvious differences might be. “They were closer to the city. The cosmopolis.”

“I grew up in Marin. In San Anselmo. I’d be at Drake High School,” She said, waiting for recognition.

“Oh really? I was at San Rafael High. Nobody in my yearbooks is still there.”

There was something I wanted to get back to “You said. ‘They know me...’”

Nina said, “Hmm?”

“When I asked you about getting some counseling, you said, ‘They know me.’ What did you mean?”

“The advisors. They’re good people. They do their job. They look at my GPA... that I ran for treasurer... I just wanted to see an election from the inside. They want me to do the college-prep... They want to know how things are at home... Even found some orgs that I might actually want to intern with... I don’t want to trash their effort, but why should I wait until I’m thirty-five and spend thirty five thousand dollars before I make my mark? They assume that what they see as a lack of focus means that I could be doing better emotionally and then I show them I’m perfectly stable. It wouldn’t be good for the bureaucracy to know that much about my private life...”

(‘*Shy and private, bold and colorful.*’) I figured there might be a better time to look closely at social things; if I got a chance to know the whole group.

“So, you want to try to tell me what’s going on in the picture? Try me for interest?” I asked.

She said, “Yeah. I think you probably have the patience.”

I said I did. “I think you can count on that.” I was telling myself that there was a chance that this discussion was more to the point than what Nina might have talked about with someone in authority.

Nina pointed at the screen on her computer and said, “Okay. This is a creek near where I used to live — this wavy stuff and the wall behind. It’s about why the little cowgirl boot is floating there.

“I can remember being in the second grade — about seven years old. I was in the school

administration office. I couldn't believe these strict people had overlooked calling my mother and were just going to let me leave school after I tore a side seam in my dress. It was unraveling" Nina smiled, "I was thinking, 'These people should know better.' Mr. Stevens, the principal, always looked like he had some invisible pole tied to his back and tied to his head. He had gotten completely red in the face one time when I wanted to go home, because I was sick to my stomach. I could tell that everybody in the office thought somebody else had made the call. I had a pretty good idea that cutting school was for older kids and that nobody was going to let a seven-year-old decide the priorities for scheduling her time, but I was off the school grounds within a few minutes and I didn't have to show up at home. Staying out of sight was probably a good idea, so that nobody would ask me what I was doing, and the best place for that was way down by the creek. It's way below everything else and totally overgrown, right?"

In the part of California that Nina was talking about — north of San Francisco, set off from the coast by a low range of hills and a couple of mountains — small canyons full of oaks and bay trees spill out into narrow creek-bank valleys. The highest slopes, with clumps of oaks, aren't developed, just covered with nonnative grasses — mostly a kind of oats from Germany, too small to winnow for any useful grain — invading from where it had originally been planted for livestock feed. I've always hoped that California hills were originally covered with grasses that looked the same.

The narrowest valleys have only small areas where a house can be built on the flat, with maybe a platform for parking cars or a footbridge across the deep creek channel. In one case, a firehouse was added by building the whole thing on a cement slab above the creek, with only the driveways — front and back — and a walkway on land. Most of the houses there have foundations that are contoured to the hills. In the steeper canyons, they are propped out on stilts.

The elementary school that Nina went to was built on the largest flat area around. At the school, there is a bridge that leads to nothing but a break in a fence that surrounds three sides of a parking lot at the main road. The explanation for why the small creek runs in the bottom of a channel about fifteen feet below this bridge — below the surrounding area as well — is that the runoff from enough consecutive days of rain can fill that channel and you can stand on that bridge and watch the muddy water rushing just below your feet at something like fifteen miles an hour. If you were to look over the rail and down, you could have the sensation that the water is still; that it is you moving, flying just above the subtly textured surface, while you stand at the stern of a fast boat with no wake. Standing on the other side of the bridge, the direction of the blur can give you the sensation of looking down over the bow of the same boat. Or maybe you could forget about the boat and just imagine yourself flying in an incongruous standing position on a small platform over the water — probably the best sensation of all.

There are no official ways to get down to the creek. At one point, half a mile upstream from the school, the creek bank is right next to the road, but most other ways down involve finding anything like a path along the overgrown banks and climbing down where there are enough footholds and handholds. Getting through thorny blackberry bushes would work well, because the undersides — even on a steep bank — are just thick stems, like a tent with lots of poles and a cover of leaves and thorny stems.

Nina told me how she navigated the creek channel itself: "I could work my way up the stream, wherever there was enough of a bank — maybe wading parts of the way, if I took off my cowgirl boots — and get to about where my house was, way before school got out.

"A few hundred yards from home, I had to get to a little kind-of beach where I had thought about sitting and waiting. It was on the opposite side of the creek. Before I could get to where the water was shallow enough to cross, I had to get past this wall and there wasn't a complete path at the base of the wall. I had to step on a little cement shelf, that was just above the water, at the bottom of a post that was part of the big wooden wall and hold onto the post — with nothing like a handle — while I swung around toward some steep dirt that I thought I might be able to stand on. It didn't work. I fell in. I can remember that while I was thinking about the toe of my shoe just barely touching a slippery rock under the water, I took in a mouthful of water and I had to cough at the

same time as finding something to stand on. Coughing was the more important thing. I was also remembering a “glub glub” cartoon thing and I had the first thought that I was really in trouble. Then I started to almost feel like I was floating a little and moving my arms and legs seemed to help. And I thought, ‘*Maybe this is swimming.*’

By the time I was just about walking on a part of the sand bar that was way under the water, I had convinced myself: ‘This *is* swimming.’ The only thing wrong was that my clothes were so heavy. I probably didn’t think twice about getting out of them. Swimming and being out of school was perfect.

“I remember my clothes laying on a rock that had some sunlight on it. A long time later — like years, recently enough — I connected my obsessive image of this shoe with some mental images of that stuff in the sunlight and a patch of sand along a creek bank. Lately I’ve concluded what must of happened, even if I can’t actually remember it: Some boys came along after school, found me there and threw all my clothes in the water.

“After that, I always refused to go swimming in just a bathing suit until a couple of years ago. I’d wear pants and a shirt. And I don’t wear a lot of baggy clothes any more.

“I don’t know what else they might have done.”

(‘*Uh oh.*’) Suddenly this was beginning to seem like not such a good idea. Maybe I should have insisted that she talk to somebody who is trained to deal with that kind of thing. Maybe *they* should have insisted. Maybe they did. I wound up having a fairly conservative response to all of it. “Actually, I do think you need to talk to someone who’s qualified about this, regardless whether they see the way you picture it, as an artist. Your art will have its day.” But this didn’t seem entirely fair. Maybe she did have it all worked out. “I’m just saying that it makes sense to me, but that I’m not qualified on all the possible consequences.”

But this didn’t effect Zoey’s outlook. She left the whole matter of the creek just as she had brought it. She said, “I’m not worried about that. But today...” I waited. She looked straight ahead. There might have been nothing for miles. I noticed someone headed toward us.

Nina said, “How would things have turned out, today, if I’d had time to think about it?”

At this point, one of “the boys” was back at the table and was putting down some cups and pouring coffee out of a green metal thermos that looked like something from grampa’s lunch box. He looked at me and said, “Want some?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

While all this was going on, Nina kept looking at me, like maybe she was waiting for a response. All I could think was that in a few years, nobody else’s answers would be good enough for her. For all I knew, she was already there and just had not yet completely adapted. “I can see that there are possibilities,” I said. But I was still trying to avoid thinking about what might have been. I gave her a weak, “I don’t know.” I was starting to sense what her academic counselors might have felt — the duty to at least ask, I suppose.

“When are you going to have a chance to talk to your parents about this?”

Nina said, “Mom’s in Mexico with her boyfriend,” followed directly by: “John, this is Jack. Jack, John.” We shook hands.

“So you’re home alone?” I asked.

Nina said, “I’ve lived by myself for a year and a half, since I moved here from Marin. Don’t tell anybody.”

This stopped my train of thought and nobody else had anything to add, right away. Nor was anybody getting ready to leave, even though Nina and I had been sitting there talking longer than time-enough for a routine interview. (‘*Have I ever done a routine interview?*’) I took a look around. It was beginning to get dark. There were some lights on across the row of second floor windows above the wall that separated the houses from the park. A nearby street light had come on. I tried more of the coffee.

Nina said, “Okay,” announcing that she was ready. She began to describe exactly what had happened in the lunch room at school earlier that day, from her point of view.

* * *

When I got back to the editorial office — just to pick some stuff up — Hal was still working. I tried to interrupt him and pitch a weekly column I wanted to do on education and outlook for students — about their “velocity.” I may have also used the word “trajectory.” I was feeling inspired, though I knew it might pass. He told me to “write something” — a prototype. I had never gotten an assignment based on one of those. He had always used them to find ways to say, “No.” I told him that I wanted to follow up on what I saw that day with something that would be substantial; that had continuity.

Hal said, “You won’t get anything out of them — the kids you talked to before Guy got there.” It was obvious who got me going in that direction. In that office, “obvious” could be very good or very bad. It depended on what they were selling.

I said, “I think they want people to know what they’re doing; what’s... I don’t know... holding them back.”

“The girl says she isn’t talking to the media.” said Hal. “Just what she’s told everybody already. That’s it.” The man could only think in headlines; what “everybody” would be talking about and where his report fit in the local media game.

I started thinking about whether to back away from the whole thing, realizing that pursuing anything more with Hal would make me “The Media” sooner or later. Better to back away at that moment, before the backtracking involved the inevitable major compromises and apologies. I figured if I really wanted to write about all this in any honest way, I’d need to be in a stronger position.

While I was weighing all this, I got a text message from Nina: “Decided I’m not talking to the media anymore about today. Let me know what their tricks are, okay? If they ask you, I don’t have any answers. AND: Somebody told Jack that Herb had been watching us, lately.”

* * *

Nina and Jack and I had also talked about a “Performance Day” that the school administration had allowed as a way students and teachers could promote the value of their “arts curriculum.” In the meantime, I’ve seen some video of the part they played.

They set up in an open area between two buildings well away from the amphitheater where the other acts were performing. There was some “bad alternative” being played and some “overly emoted” vocal music and rap by other people and “the school administration people were turning everybody off by trying too hard to show how into-it-all they were.” When it was time for The Not Name (they had to give the school administration a name to go by) a couple of the guys got started by working echoes off the far wall, using recorded sounds, which you can hear clearly on the video, but it’s not easy to tell where it’s coming from or who is doing it. When they got some kids’ attention, they started working the reactions and getting more attention that way.

Nina says, “Five minutes into this everybody could tell that the administration people didn’t know what to make of it and that was fuel. When it was really blazing away, Jack got out a wireless mike setup and came over to where I was sitting and dropped it in my bag.”

She didn’t know what he was doing until she looked in her bag to see exactly what it was. She hit the mike on something just after Jack brought it up on the mixing board and everybody heard that slap back and forth across the open space.

“Jack just kept looking at me and a lot of people were looking at me to see what I would do. So I put the mike up to my face and hooted into it,” she said.

Since Jack had that mike way up, the sound exploded back and forth. “Jack slid the level down to keep from scaring me off and I went on hooting and stuff like that, mixed with all the other echoes, in rhythm with everybody else.”

One of “the boys” started playing a clean-but-slidey melody on a guitar in rhythm with the

sampled sounds and Nina took it up, singing repetitive things off the top of her head.

Nina said, "After that day, I was there for the weekly jams, but they kept saying they didn't actually want to have 'a band' in the normal sense." She was immediately full of ideas about where the music could go, anyway, and had been saying so.

They had a jam the night before Herb brought his guns to school. Afterwards, Jack was talking about a rant that a reactionary teacher had written to one of the deans about the way their music had "disrupted" the performance day. A sympathetic teacher had quoted much of the rant to them in a class.

"Ah yes, another five hours of '*seemingly incoherent music*,'" he said. And then, taking the ranter's role: "You call that music? It sounded like car alarms to me. Which do you kids prefer?" Then pretending to be a cartoon version of himself, "Oh I prefer car alarms. Car horns, too. Cars crashing. Bottles skittering down a sidewalk and banging off the sides of cars," becoming more sincere as he went on with it, and then lapsing back to, "...like nothing but a pack of dogs barking," quoting the reactionary teacher.

The next day at school, standing around in a room just off the cafeteria that used to be a classroom, Jack was still going on the same way. "What did that old man say? A symphony of car alarms?"

"An *ensemble* of car alarms," somebody corrected him.

Jack asked Nina, "Did you hear any songs?"

Nina began to reiterate her idea that some of the jams could evolve into songs, "without getting all 'serious' about it," but she was interrupted by some one who looked to be headed through where they were all standing together. Nina realized that she was where the door would have to swing in order to let the guy go out. She turned around and pulled the door the rest of the way open and found herself face-to-face with some one who was about to come in.

Herbert Dean Smith had a handgun in his left hand, another in the right front pocket of his pants and God-knocks what kind of rifle slung across his back. Nina's immediate thought was, "I'm going to die very soon. I have nothing to lose." She was wrong, of course, but she said later that this was just her "simplest way to consider fate." Her next thought was, "We don't know what time is." She said it had begun to seem like a lot of it might have passed. Herbert Dean was acting momentarily indecisive. She put out her hand and said, "I'm Nina. I don't think we've met. Maybe you've heard my band."

"Herb," he said, though she knew this.

He had been looking over her head into the room, but when he looked down at her, they were alone. He took her right hand in his. His eyes were losing some of the intensity she had first seen. Nina was unsure how long they stood like that. Later, she said that everything that she had ever done before that moment, "might just as well have happened on another planet, or in a movie, on TV or something; a book I'd read."

She put her left hand on top of his right hand, still in hers. The gun was still in his left hand; still not pointed at anything. He looked at the gun and then looked back at Nina.

"I don't know anything," she said, "but I think it will be a lot easier when you have to think about this, later, if you stop thinking about it very much right now." She waited to see if he had anything to say. "I want there to be a 'later' Herb."

She let herself think about the possibility. Herb gave no response. Going this well, Nina tried to think of as many things as she could to keep it going; unthreatening things — for both of them. "Let's sit down." Nina sat on the floor in the doorway and fought the urge to look back into the room. She knew that Herb had to consider "the boys," standing inside the open doorway, but he wasn't acting out anything toward them.

Nina was still holding Herb's right hand and gave it a slight tug. He kind of sat down, but had one knee up, with one foot under that, because of the rifle. His balance was tentative. He looked at her, she hoped, for more ideas. "Can you put that on the floor?" She said, nodding toward the gun in his hand. After long consideration, he did. "The other one?" He shifted his position to get the other handgun out of his pocket. Nina touched her left shoulder to indicate the the rifle strap on

his. He didn't seem to know exactly how to work that. "Push the guns away and nobody will be worried about what they were for." Herb did that and relaxed a little. He dropped his shoulder slightly and let the strap slide down in front of him, unhooked it and then pushed the rifle away without looking at it. He looked at his hands.

Nina could see some slight stirring in the room, out of the corner of her eye. She glanced in that direction without actually meeting anyone's gaze, but it stopped anyone from moving closer. She waited to hear if Herb had anything to say and then said, "Um... Lets go for a walk," and looked in the direction of the door at the end of the hallway where she figured they were least likely to encounter anybody that might want to get involved. They heard sirens at that point. Herb looked back in that direction.

"Yeah, cops," said Nina, "You don't have the guns." She knew there was a chance that he could panic, but she hoped that the idea would have the opposite effect. They kept walking, even after they heard things going on at the doorway on back toward the other end of the hall.

"And somebody must have turned on their phone," she said. "I could hear, '*La cucaracha, la cucaracha.*'

"Someone slammed open the door where we were headed and then backed away. Another guy wearing a big vest and a baseball cap that said 'Police' came through the door.

"So I can imagine what this second cop is thinking when he comes in and sees us just strolling along there: 'Don't you children know there's a killer on the loose?'"

At this point in her description, Zoey held her arm up high and pointed down, like she was pointing at the top of Herb's head.

"So Herb takes off and the cop takes off after him and he's yelling things at his shoulder, but he almost comes to a stop at about the same time that another cop comes in the door that they're running toward and they run right past Herb's guns on the floor — thank god nobody was picking them up — and when the first cop gets slowed down enough, he puts his gun in his holster and snaps the little tab over it." She looked back and forth at Jack and I. "Yeah, I figured out why.

"So he's running again when Herb sees the other cop and Herb slows down to not even walking, really, and the three of them just barely don't collide and then they throw Herb on the floor."

They quickly had Herb's hands behind his back. He didn't resist being handcuffed. Nina said it didn't look painful.

Nina was disappointed that they hadn't made it outside. She said she wasn't sure why. She said she started shaking so much that she had to put both hands on the wall of lockers, "to keep from falling down," though she said that that might have been an exaggeration.

"I listened to everybody chattering away down the hall and all the ring-tones all going off at about the same time. It was lovely."

* * *

After the jam, Jack and Bobby and Nina talked a little, before leaving. "Ah yes, another five hours of 'seemingly incoherent music,'" said Jack. And then, taking the ranter's role: "You call that music? It sounded like car alarms to me. Which do you kids prefer?" Then pretending to be a cartoon version of himself, "Oh I prefer car alarms. Car horns, too. Cars crashing. Bottles skittering down a sidewalk and banging off the sides of cars," becoming more sincere as he went on with it, and then lapsing back to, "...like nothing but a pack of dogs barking," quoting the reactionary teacher.

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